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Obama announces \$100-million expansion of minority youth project



President Obama, at the Walker Jones Education Campus in Washington, speaks about the My Brother's Keeper initiative, a program intended to help young minority males. (Mark Wilson / Getty Images)

By Rebecca Bratek, July 21, 2014

President Obama on Monday announced more than \$100 million in new commitments to his My Brother's Keeper initiative, launched in February to increase opportunities for young minority men.

The funds will come from leading public and private-sector organizations, such as AT&T, the Emerson Collective, the College Board and Citi Foundation.

In addition, more than 60 of the nation's largest public school systems have committed to an 11-point plan to reduce dropout rates, the White House said.

"America will succeed if we're investing in our young people, and we also know that we've got to make sure that boys and young men of color are part of that success," Obama said during a town-hall-style address at Walker Jones Educational Center in Washington, D.C. My Brother's Keeper is "one more tool that you have to expand your network of people who can support you, give you ideas, buck you up when you're down."

Obama created My Brother's Keeper – a five-year initiative – to address opportunity gaps faced by black and Latino youths. He said its goal was to break down barriers holding back youngsters who didn't have the opportunities he did growing up.

"The only difference between me and extraordinarily talented young men that I see all across the country is I was living in a pretty forgiving environment," Obama said, addressing the many students in Monday's crowd. "Some of the costs of making mistakes, they weren't deadly. I wasn't going to end up shot. I wasn't going to end up in jail."

“And as a consequence, for the last five, six, 10 years, I’ve constantly been thinking about how can I make sure I’m evening out the odds a little bit for other young men who could end up being a doctor or a lawyer or a senator or an attorney general or a secretary of education,” he added.

By the ninth grade, 42% of black male students have been suspended or expelled, according to White House data. That compares with 14% of white males of the same age. And though blacks make up 16% of the youth population, they represent 28% of juvenile arrests.

Nearly twice as many young black men are not working or enrolled in school compared with their white counterparts, the data say. Because of that disparity, those men are not building the skills they need to succeed later in life, Obama said.

The president, during a question-and-answer session, noted that many black youths see only role models who play basketball or perform rap music. He said My Brother’s Keeper was intended to expose troubled youngsters to fields such as graphic design, engineering and law.

Among the new commitments, the NBA said it would recruit 25,000 new mentors and work with educators in at-risk schools to increase attendance and performance. The five-year commitment will include using current and former professional basketball players to inspire young men of color through teamwork and leadership workshops.

AT&T donated \$18 million to support mentoring programs in America’s high schools, and Emerson Collective, which was founded by Laurene Powell Jobs, wife of the late Apple founder Steve Jobs, will help raise \$50 million to design plans for next-generation high schools.

The My Brother’s Keeper Task Force, the interagency presidential task force created to assess federal policies in relation to minority youth, also announced two new youth corps programs to help young people enter the workforce.

“We want fewer young men in jail,” Obama said. “We want more of them in college.”